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ABSTRACT

Although composition theorists have rejected the "alchemy" of the traditional, impressionistic, unscientific view of composition as product in favor of a process oriented approach, they have as yet failed to reach a consensus about the epistemological bases that undergird this shift. An examination of parallel developments in literary theory and of their effects on composition theory reveals that composition theorists are faced with two emerging epistemological alternatives. an epistemic view of the composing act or a heuristic one. The epistemic view embraces a relativistic stance that rejects a mimetic view of discourse and liberates the rhetor from constraints of an overbearing "objective reality." Rejecting empirical and rationalistic science, this paradigm remystifies the composing act, replacing the old compostion alchemy with a new one that denies the possibility of discovering truth. In place of epistemic relativism, a heuristic view offers a self-confessed but controlled subjectivism that has truth as its goal while denying to know absolute truth self-evidently. Symptomatic of our current epistemological problem, tagmemics, the best developed composition heuristic, is avoided precisely because it acknowledges the complexity of reality and takes seriously its inquiry into it; nevertheless, such a heuristic view is needed to reinvigorate the teaching of writing and to keep the writing act meaningful in a technological society. (JL)

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Rhetoric, Alchemy and Heuristic Procedures: Some Epistemological Questions*

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It is difficult to date precisely when composition began to evolve as a discipline with a distinct identity—i.e., when it began overtly to possess its own nomenclature, its own operational matrix, its own "body" of literature. But a strong case might be made for the year 1963. It was the year Albert Kitzhaber declared in his Themes, Theories and Therapy that "Freshman English in the nation's colleges and universities is now so confused, so clearly in need of radical and sweeping reforms, that college English departments can continue to ignore the situation only at their increasing peril."[1] More importantly, perhaps, 1963 was also the year NCTE published Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer's Research in Written Composition; Braddock and company concluded their evaluation of composition research with the stinging rebuke that it was comparable at best to "chemical research as it emerged from the period of alchemy: some terms are being defined usefully, a number of procedures are being refined, but the field as a whole is laced with dreams, prejudices and makeshift operations."[2]

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Our pedagogical and research confidence thus jolted, these pronouncements and others like them in the intervening years seem to have precipitated what has become a twenty year search for a sound, empirically verifiable foundation for writing pedagogy and research in composing. It has accelerated our self-conscious, sometimes self-deprecating, emergence as a discipline and fueled our hunger for acceptance and respect among literateurs. Another way of saying this is: since at least 1963, composition teachers and theorists have been running from alchemy, Braddock and company's carefully selected analogue for our formerly impressionistic and unscientific notions about the teaching of writing. Alchemy was and remains a powerful metaphor for our false starts and continued frustrations in trying to isolate and articulate the composing act. It effectively evokes the Dark Ages we are trying to escape: times of obscurantism, times of debilitating ignorance, times of wickedness in high places. Our flight from alchemy has led us through t-units to tagmemics, from case studies of twelfth grade composers to neurolinguistics and protocol analyses. It now promises, perhaps, to lead us away from the "metaphysics of presence" down to the foreboding valley of deconstruction.

The alchemical ghost which haunts us has corporeal form in what is known as the "current-traditional rhetoric," Richard Young's label by way of Daniel Fogarty. CTR has come to stand for all that we feared in the recent past: a schoolmarmish attention to grammatical correctness and a slavish adherence to the conventions of standard English at the expense of the individual's personal, creative, intuitive impulses. Our attempts at exorcising this demon have left us

with two enduring monuments. One of them is the glittering dichotomy: process versus product, a dichotomy so far more phonological, it seems, than semantical. So powerful is this shibboleth that no composition textbook can be successfully marketed without paying homage to it. It is difficult to discern, nevertheless, any dramatic pedagogical changes as a result of this shift in terminology. The other monument, and the more creditable one in my estimation, is the emerging notion that rhetoric is heuristic in nature, i.e., truth-discovering, and not merely managerial, or truth-rendering. This recognition has led some to advocate the use of heuristic procedures in the classroom teaching of writing, involving a revival of the classical topoi, as well as the refurbishing of Kenneth Burke's pentad, the appropriation of Kenneth Pike's linguistic matrix and a host of other devices, some empirical, some rationalistic. Richard Young's characterization of heuristic procedures as distinguishable from rule-governed procedures and random, trial and error methods is worth citing here:

> A rule governed procedure specifies a finite series of steps that can be carried out in mechanical fashion without the use of intuition or special ability and that infallibly results in a correct answer. . . . A heuristic procedure, on the other hand, provides a series of questions or operations that guides inquiry and increases the chances of discovering a workable solution.[3]

The heuristic procedure is by definition more systematic, but not

less intuitive, than random brainstorming.

This advocacy of heuristic procedures as a response to alchemical pedagogy has not, however, been met with unequivocal enthusiasm. For instance, in the past decade, Ann Berthoff has been a persistent critic of the socio-political ramifications of the "problem-solving" paradigm within which some heuristics have been forged.[4] Susan Wells has decried the empiricist bias she finds in the tagmemic matrix and Christensen's rhetoric of the sentence, heuristics which seem to preclude certain kinds of knowledge gathering.[5] In a similar vein, James Kinney has defended the tagmemic heuristic from the charge of empiricism, only to criticize it for its "contemplative rationalism."[6] It is thus clear that though we may be ready to "close the books on alchemy," and shift our emphases from the product of composition to the process of composing, we have yet to reach a consensus about the epistemological bases which undergird this shift. In leaving behind the alchemist as a symbol for our previous ignorance, we are not yet prepared to receive the chemist in his place.

With the foregoing in view, I would like to address some of the epistemological questions which surface when one examines the profession's product-to-process shift, focusing specifically on the use of heuristics as symptomatic of this shift. In order, I would like to (1) review some parallel shifts which have occurred in the ancillary disciplines of literary and communication theory; (2) discuss the epistemological status, as I see it, of past and present composition pedagogies; and (3) offer a modest defense of a heuristic view of composition.

Revolutions in literary and communication theory

Though inquiry into the epistemology of composition may be a recent phenomenon, contemporary literary theorists and rhetoricians have for some time been exploring the rhetor/author as discourser and her relationships with her text, her audience and the world at large. Among literary theorists, one need only think of the decentering activity of continental deconstructionists and Anglo-American reader-response critics who have been calling in question the objective status of texts and the individual personalities of authors and readers. Among rhetoricians, one may cite recent conceptualizations of rhetoric as epistemic and architectonic, i.e., truth-creating, a "transactional process which creates and sustains the realities by which we live."[7]

It is possible to view much of contemporary literary theory as an extreme reaction to New Criticism--whose entrenched methodology of explication insisted on a radically autonomous text, free from the pollution of authorial intention or affective response. Rejecting an objectivist stance which regards texts as temporally stable and hermeneutically determinate, some recent theorists have embraced a pluralism which conceives the text as something constituted from the reader's own consciousness or that of a superseding interpretive community. Likewise, architectonic rhetoric rejects an objectivist viewpoint which argues that knowledge is obtained via extra-rhetorical processes, and relegates rhetoric itself to the effective transmission of already-arrived-at discourse. In its place is a rhetorical relativism which

maintains that the function of rhetoric is to create knowledge through the use of language and the building of social consensus.

Contemporary literary and communication theory thus manifest some common themes: (1) a shift in focus from the product of discourse to the process of discoursing; (2) a rejection of a naive objectivism which permits authors or audiences unmediated access to an unambiguous text; (3) a recognition of the active role of the observer/community in meaning-making; (4) a high view of invention within the literary or rhetorical act as a creative, and not merely managerial, process. In both realms, theorists conceptualize the text as a world, and the world itself becomes a kind of text, seen through a glass darkly.

The epistemology of composition pedagogy

This brief survey of trends in recent literary/communication theory uncovers a number of parallels to the foment within contemporary composition pedagogy. Our alchemical bogey, the current-traditional rhetoric, clearly bears resemblances to the objectivism which these theories abandon. Its emphasis on the text-as-object, as an autonomous product, its neglect of invention and enthronement of arrangement and style, its managerial and taxonomic emphases, have elicited the strongest negative responses. Within such a paradigm, the writer is decontextualized and encouraged to abstract himself from himself, from his text and audience and from the world he seeks to understand and articulate. Perhaps the most telling criticism of current-traditional epistemology is voiced

by Richard Ohmann, whose book English in America concludes with the sobering comment that the profession of composition has engendered "skills (fluency, organization, analysis) and . . . attitudes (caution, detachment, cooperation)" which are "essential to the techno-structure and to the functioning of liberal (but not liberated) society" and therefore are suspect as rhetorical complements to advanced capitalism.[8]

In vanquishing this alchemical epistemology, we have nevertheless failed to replace it with anything as enduring or as comfortable. There is, in fact, a decided ambivalence within the profession as it faces a future without a clearly-defined epistemology. On the one hand are the innumerable why-can't-Johnny-write articles which document our creeping national illiteracy—and which seem to demand an objectivist pedagogy that will restore basic competencies. On the other hand, there is the unsettling recognition that perhaps language and language use are inevitably ideological and that any measure of the former epistemology will indirectly encourage social quietism and homogenization.

Faced with this dilemma, composition teachers and theorists have begun to turn to one of two emerging alternatives: (1) the acceptance of an epistemic conception of the composing act; or (2) the acceptance of a heuristic conception of the composing act. I would like to spend the rest of my time explicating these two alternatives, concluding with a defense of the latter view.

The epistemic view of composition embraces a relativistic stance which rejects a mimetic view of discourse and liberates the rhetor from the contraints of an overbearing "objective reality." In Michael Halloran's words:

> The assumptions about knowledge and the world that informed classical rhetoric are no longer tenable. External reality is paradoxical; our very effort to know something of the physical environment alters that which we seek to know so that the object-as-known is not the same as the object we set out to know. . . . It is no longer valid to assume that speaker and audience live in the same world and to study the techniques by which the speaker moves the audience to act or think in a particular way.[9]

Sharon Crowley, concurring with Professor Halloran, suggests that the model rhetorician for our day should be neither Plato nor Aristotle, but Gorgias of Leontini, who understood that "truth. . . is a product of the human psyche, and not of external reality."[10] For Professor Crowley, "the art of rhetoric is not an art of presence, of seeking truth; it is, instead, an art in the use of language."[11]

Since, in the epistemic view, discourse "is not representative of presence, but is the creation of someone who is removed from us in time and space," the ultimate goal of such an art should be "to free language from any ties to objective reality, in order that language may be exploited to its fullest potential as a medium for creating illusions and exciting the emotions."[12] Within this paradigm, composition is a process, but it is neither managerial nor heuristic. It is not managerial because it denies the claim that language can refer to an objective reality external to it; its function is not the communication of truth, rather the creation of truth consensually. It is not heuristic

because, skeptical of an independent reality subject to investigation and exposition, it posits an autonomous discourse which creates, not discovers or represents, reality. In Michael Fischer's words, "Reality is not some 'transcendental signified' that preexists and limits the 'freeplay' of literary discourse. It is rather a realm which is itself a kind of text or verbal invention."[13] Epistemic discourse is about itself.

This epistemic paradigm encompasses, I believe, those whom Richard Young has called the "New Romantics" and their attendant heuristic procedures which James Kinney would classify as "intuitive."[14] The epistemic view is compelling for several reasons, not the least of which is its veiled rejection of both empirical and rationalistic science and its derivative, scientism--which are thought to be inimical to creativity, individuality, "freeplay" in the composing act. By remystifying the composing act, freeing it from the constraints of objective reality and preempting inquiry by the scientific method, it is hoped that the humanities may once again be shielded from the disintegration and dissolution which attended religious faith in the post-Englightenment world.

In fact, I would argue, the epistemic paradigm not only does not shield the humanities from this fate, it helps to accelerate their demise--and that by undermining its own ontological status. The epistemic view in effect creates a New Alchemy to replace the old. By emphasizing the uniqueness of the creative act and the autonomy of discourse, the New Alchemists would raise a disembodied process to the status of the old alchemist's disembodied text-product. The old

alchemy was an imitative, logic-oriented search for competence in the product; as such, it spoke highly of clarity, unity and economy and revered Strunk and White. The New Alchemy turns inward, searching for liberation within the writer's consciousness; using heuristics to stimulate the creative impulse, it speaks highly of the use of obscurity and reveres Derrida and Fish.

The heuristic paradigm in composition

Against both of these paradigms, I would offer one based on a heuristic view of composition. A heuristic view acknowledges the problematic, contingent nature of reality and inquiries into its nature. At the same time, it posits a reality which is pre-existent and independent of our observation of it. One must carefully distinguish between the naive objectivism which the old and the new alchemies rejected and the concept of "objective reality." It is in fact the case, as Gene Blocker argues, that it is the concept of "objective reality" which enables us to acknowledge the "limitations of the human standpoint to completely reproduce the world in thought and deed."[14] We recognize our constructs of reality as constructs by making reference to an objective reality which our constructs fail to capture. One may thus criticize the doctrine of objectivism without surrendering a notion of "objective reality."[15]

In the place of the New Alchemy's relativism, a heuristic view offers a self-confessed, but controlled subjectivism which has truth as its goal while denying the claim to know absolute truth self-evidently.

In Jack Orr's terms, "The continuous quest for truth provides the basis for a sustained challenge to self-congratulatory claims for absolute knowledge."[16] According to his view, "objective truth cannot be consistently denied, but knowledge is uncertain."[17] In contrast, the epistemic view suggests that the best the writer can do is to "create a fiction" about the world which may eventyally reach a consensus and therefore be held to be "truth." This is, of course, a problematic stance. In such a framework, if truth is merely agreement, what can be said of the rebel who challenges social opinions? He or she must always speak falsely, In such a case, the epistemic view proves to be inadequate to provide a consistent basis for meaningful critique of either itself or objectivism. A heuristic view, on the other hand, allows for critique of both: if the epistemic view were "correct," one could never know it.

The use of discovery procedures in the teaching of writing under the heuristic view presupposes that the writer may not only manage information or create fictions, but may also discover truth about the world she inhabits. The heuristic view assumes that it is possible to distinguish between and among these three activities, and that, indeed, it is the writer's explicit task to do so. A heuristic view accepts the notion that though we cannot know exhaustively, we can nevertheless know truly. The writer is not trapped in a "prison house of language."

The most developed and systematic heuristic pedagogy is that commonly known as tagmemics. It is also the least accessible and

least employed of all recent composition pedagogies despite the fact that it offers the most comprehensive epistemological foundation for the teaching of writing so far devised. Its status is probably emblematic of our professional ambivalence. Because tagmemics acknowledges the complexity of reality and takes seriously the problem of articulating and inquiring into the nature of that reality, it cannot be conveniently parcelled into handbook-like tips and lists and hints. As a result, it has been shunted aside as a once-promising hypothesis. Whatever its demerits, it remains the most sustained attempt at grappling with writing as a process and a behavior.

I close by citing C. S. Lewis who is paraphrasing Ralph Waldo Emerson:

> It is a disastrous discovery. . . that we exist. [It] is disastrous when instead of merely attending to a rose we are forced to think of ourselves looking at the rose with a certain type of mind and a certain type of eyes. It is disastrous because, if you are not very careful, the colour of the rose gets attributed to our optic nerves and its scent to our noses, and in the end there is no rose left.[18]

One might add that it has become a disastrous discovery that we write. For to write and to read in our time have become intransitive verbs, and it is tempting to proffer an apocalyptic prophecy of the profession's soon demise; but such will not happen. We are too resourceful for that. Yet if we survive and if the writing act remains a meaningful deed in a technological society, it will be because we have implicitly, operationally, accepted a heuristic, not an epistemic view of composition. The latter view cannot provide a consistent basis for conceptualizing and exploring the expository nature of what we are attempting to teach. It

cannot avoid sentencing the writer to incessant autobiography. Only a heuristic view of composition promises us the possibility of articulating what it is that writers do when they do it--and of knowing when we have done so.

Notes

[1] Albert Kitzhaber, Themes, Theories and Therapy (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), p. 10.

[2] Richard Braddock, et al., Research in Written Composition (Urbana: NCTE, 1963), p. 5.

[3] Richard E. Young, Alton Becker and Kenneth Pike, Rhetoric: Discovery and Change (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970), p. 120.

[4] Ann Berthoff, "The Problem of Problem Solving," in W. Ross Winterowd, ed., Contemporary Rhetoric (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975), p. 93.

[5] Susan Wells, "Classroom Heuristics and Empiricism," College English, 39 (1977), 475-76.

[6] James Kinney, "Classifying Heuristics," College Composition and Communication, 30 (1979), 353.

[7] C. Jack Orr, "Communication, Relativism and Student Development," Communication Education, 27 (1978), 84.

[8] Richard Ohmann, English in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 302.

[9] S. Michael Halloran, "On the End of Rhetoric, Classical and Modern," College English, 36 (1976), 624-25.

[10] Sharon Crowley, "Of Gorgias and Grammatology," College Composition and Communication, 30 (1979), 279.

[11] Ibid., 284.

[12] Ibid., 281.

[13] Michael Fischer, "Why Realism Seems So Naive," College English, 40 (March, 1979), 740.

[14] Gene Blocker, "Back to Reality," Metaphilosophy, 5 (1974), 236.

[15] Cf. C. Jack Orr, "How Shall We Say 'Reality is Socially Constructed through Communication'?" Central States Speech Journal, 29 (Winter, 1978), 267-69.

[16] Ibid., p. 269.

[17] Ibid., p. 271.

[18] C. S. Lewis, God in the Dock (Eerdmans, 1970), p. 271.